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Combine school elections with others

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Combine school elections with others

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House Bill 130 proposes, among other election matters, to require Montana counties to convert to all-mail ballot elections by next year.

All-mail elections, the reasoning goes, will save the counties money while making voting more convenient - therefore encouraging more people to cast votes.

We outlined our objections to all-mail systems in yesterday's editorial. Today, we want to support another, better way of reducing the costs of holding elections while increasing voter turnout: Holding school elections on the same date as either the primary or the general elections in November.

This simple change would simplify elections for voters, save taxpayer money and help increase voter participation - and is being proposed to our legislators in the form of House Bill 242, introduced by Helmsville Republican Rep. Mike Miller. This bill would move primary elections to the same day as the May school elections, and not the other way around, presumably because schools have their budget cycles and moving election day would cause some budget scheduling headaches.

It is no secret that school elections typically see dismal turnout rates. Last year's school election turnout results were considered robust with only

37 percent of registered voters in Missoula County casting a vote. And that was more than twice the turnout of the previous school election. A mere five years ago, school election turnout was lurking in the the single digits.

The possible reasons for this lack of motivation are myriad. Interest in "big-ticket" candidates, such as governors, senators and presidents, and statewide or national issues, are credited with driving a lot of public interest in elections - and are never found on school ballots. Perhaps many would-be voters feel they do not need to participate if they do not have children in public school - even though school board members make decisions that affect the wider community, and school levies affect us all.

In fact, it is arguable that school election results determined by such a small portion of the community cannot possibly accurately reflect the will of the public. Without more voters, of course, it is impossible to prove.

In any case, holding fewer elections each year would relieve some of the pressure on election administrators. Over the years Missoula County has had a more and more difficult time finding enough people to staff the polls. Yet when faced with the prospect of closing polls in late 2009, Missoula residents raised such a hue and cry the county ended up closing fewer polls than it had originally planned. Still, the county did have to reduce the number of polling places from 37 to 29. And it still had difficulty scraping up the estimated 600 election judged needed to help administer the election.

Clearly, something needs to change. But instead of making major changes to our system of voting, our legislators ought to look within the tried-and-true system we use now for possible improvements. Doing away with a separate election for schools would be a fine place to start.

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